

## Perfectly At Home by Juxtaposie

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**Summary:**

'Her physical body is a revelation.

The lab had given it minimal care. She'd been fed and sheltered and kept clean and healthy, but she'd never been nurtured... Papa never cared what her body could do - but it housed her mind and was therefore something to be tolerated.

That it possesses the capacity for anything beyond pain is almost transcendental. '

Or, five ways El learns to love her physical form and one way someone else loves her.

## Perfectly At Home

### Author's Note:

Banged this out (haha!) while trying to get through my next big piece. Needed some fluff to offset the angst, ya know? Fair warning, there's some non-graphic sexual situations in this story. If that makes you uncomfortable just skip the last section.

Her physical body is a revelation.

The lab had given it minimal care. She'd been fed and sheltered and kept clean and healthy, but she'd never been nurtured. Her meals were bland, and often lukewarm. She'd only ever had water to drink (and apple juice, once, as a treat). She was barefooted and cold, the thin hospital gown not nearly enough for the meticulously climate-controlled environment that surrounded her. Everything a body needed to grow and thrive had been given to her in the scantest amounts reasonably possible. Papa never cared what her body could do - but it housed her mind and was therefore something to be tolerated.

That it possesses the capacity for anything beyond pain is almost transcendental.

(She likes that word, transcendental; it means something is surpassing or superior, but it also means to be beyond the ordinary and she's anything but ordinary.)

It starts not with Mike, but with Hopper. It starts with the cabin.

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### *Build:*

"Okay," Hop says, "We're just gonna take the curved end here and work it into the groove a little - see?"

El nods, crouching low to watch as he works the cat's paw into the non-existent space between the narrow window ledge and the

window frame.

“Then we’re just gonna take the hammer, and...” A few gentle strikes drive the cat’s paw down between the boards, and Hopper uses the leverage to pry them apart half an inch or so. “You don’t wanna just yank it out, that’ll splinter the wood and we spent all our money on new glass.” He gives her a look that’s somehow both admonishing and affectionate, then offers her the tools. “You wanna try?”

She takes a deep breath, lets it out, then holds her hand out toward the window ledge, but she’s barely started before Hopper flips the hammer and slaps the grip into her open palm.

“Uh-uh,” he says, closing her fingers. “We’re doing this with tools.”

“Why?” she demands, not because she’s indignant but because she genuinely doesn’t see how it matters.

“Because I said so,” Hopper answers, and El rolls her eyes and huffs, but takes the cat’s paw from him.

She’s not nearly as fast at it as Hopper was. The hammer is heavy, and both tools feel awkward and hard in her soft hands. Hop has to help, reaching one arm around her to steady the hammer as she brings it down on the cat’s paw, but she’s able to pry the boards apart, and he lets her work down the entire length of the window ledge before he takes the cat’s paw back from her. He makes sure she’s watching before using the flat end to work the piece of wood loose even further.

“And then we just...” He works his fingers into the crevice, and nods his chin toward the other end for her to do the same, and together they pull the ledge off.

“Watch the nails,” he says as he sets the board aside.

El feels a smile creeping across her face, feeling strangely proud of the fact that they were able to take something apart in a way that would allow them to put it back together again, but the smile falters when Hopper picks the tools back up.

“Okay,” he says, using the hammer to gesture toward the planks

bordering the window. "Next we're gonna pry these off the fra - Hey, what's that face?"

She thinks she might be glowering when she says, "My hands hurt."

"Yeah, they're gonna," Hop says kindly. "We can get you some gloves if you want."

She's not sure why she refuses the offer, but she does, and they spend the next hour prying the frame off of the window. They spend the hour after that prying out the pulley-wheel mechanisms that let the windows open and close. The window frames Hopper bought are newer, he explains to her. They'll be easier to open, and they'll do a much better job at keeping the elements out, but installing them is a lot of work.

"You up for it?" he asks. They're almost eye level from where she's standing on one of their kitchen chairs, prying the frame away from the wall. He's holding the base, waiting to catch her if she slips, and she's not sure if he's trying to punish her for breaking all the glass, but somehow she doesn't really think so. There's no anger in his voice, no hardness in his eyes. Just an earnestness that makes her stomach turn over with all the love hiding behind it.

She turns back to the broken window, and uses the hammer to drive the edge of the cat's paw into the space between the frame and the wall. "Yes," she says, relishing the slow burn in her arms and shoulders.

Hopper still has to go to work (and he's putting out fires left and right because the lab is *closing* and suddenly El feels like she can breathe again) so it takes them two weeks to replace all the windows. Three days in she wakes up with blisters on the palm of her right hand - one beneath each of her first three fingers, and in the webbing near the base of her thumb.

"Well look at that," Hopper says when she shows him that afternoon. "Sure you don't want those gloves?"

El shakes her head. She doesn't like gloves - or hats, or scarves, or wool socks (though cotton-lycra blend socks are all right). She's still

not quite used to things that cover and constrain.

Hopper just shrugs and reminds her she can ask for them if she changes her mind, and it turns out to be a mistake when she doesn't. The blisters burst, but it's Hop who notices and not her.

He takes the hammer from her to show her how to pry out a particularly stubborn nail, and when he hands it back there's just the smallest smudge of red on his palm. He rubs his thumb over it thoughtfully, finds unbroken skin beneath, and says, "Lemme see your hand, kid."

She opens her palm, and he grimaces. There's really not much blood, but the red, open wounds glisten wetly.

"Doesn't that hurt?" he asks gently.

El, looking down at her hand, says, "Yes," her voice small in the quiet of the cabin.

Hopper huffs a little. "Why didn't you say anything?"

She shrugs, suddenly ashamed for no reason she can name. "No one cared," she says carefully. "Before."

When Hopper speaks his voice is gruff, and a little pained, like he's the one who's hurt. "Yeah, well, I'm not nobody. C'mere."

He leads her into the bathroom with one hand on her shoulder, then rummages in the medicine cabinet for bandaids and iodine. Sitting on the sink, she lets him clean her hand with the cold, stinging liquid.

He's unwrapping a bandaid when he says, "You need to tell me when you're hurt, El. No one wants you to be in pain, or do something that's gonna hurt you."

"Okay," she says, still embarrassed, and only partly sure she understands. The line between unpleasant and painful is thin and blurry, and she's not sure how she's supposed to define it, but if Hop wants her to tell him when she's hurting she's going to do her best to do that. It's nice to hear it said out loud, that he cares whether or not she's in pain. Papa had never cared, not even a little.

She wears the work gloves after that. The blisters heal and harden - calluses, Hopper calls them. They finish replacing all the windows.

"Not bad, kid," Hopper says one arm wrapped around her shoulders as they stand in the middle of the room to survey their handiwork. "Not bad at all."

"What next?" El asks, the hammer dangling from her right hand. She likes the weight of it.

Hopper pauses, looking down at her with a sly, gentle smile. "You wanna be a construction worker when you grow up?" It must show on her face that she's not sure what he means - she has no clue what a construction worker is - and he says, "They build things like houses and skyscrapers. They build walls and put in windows and install flooring and roofs."

She can tell by the look on his face that he's teasing but she gives her answer serious thought, searching for the right words to describe how she feels about the satisfying ache in her limbs, the subtle sting still present in her hands (her increased appetite, the way she's been sleeping better, the happy little thrill she gets looking out the windows and knowing she helped put them there). "I like it," she says slowly. "Building, and not... breaking. I like building. It feels..."

"Good?" Hop offers when words fail her.

It's simpler than she wants it to be, but it's also the absolute truth. "Yes," she agrees. "It feels good."

Hopper uses his free hand to scratch the side of his nose, and he gives a deep, groaning sigh. He's still teasing a little when he says, "Well I'll have to look at our budget, but I suppose since we replaced all these other windows we might as well do the ones in your bedroom too."

The windows in her bedroom don't open. She thinks of the possibilities; opening the windows to let the cool night air in when summer gets too hot, feeling the warmth of a spring morning, the movie she saw on TV two weeks ago where a boy crawled through a girl's window because he'd needed to see her so badly he couldn't

wait until the sun came up. She can't help smiling.

"Yes, please," she says, leaning into Hopper's side. "I'd like that."

She tightens her grip around the hammer, and even though her hand still stings she doesn't mind the pain.

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*Eat:*

Hopper promises her things will be different, and he keeps that promise. She gets to see her friends once or twice a month and even manages to convince Hopper that Mike should be able to come on his own. (She loves Lucas and Dustin, and Will is easy to be around - even Max isn't so bad, though she's only come once - but being able to spend time with Mike while Hopper's at work is the best.)

But once or twice a month still leaves her alone an awful lot of the time, and for no reason she can really name this particular boring Tuesday afternoon finds her standing in front of the open fridge inspecting its contents.

It's not the first time she's done something like this. Four months into hiding she'd been so bored she'd gone through the entire fridge and pantry and tasted every single thing she could find. There hadn't been much at that point, but between the new windows last November, their little Christmas, and heating the cabin through winter their budget is strapped. Hop's been taking his lunch to work, and cooking dinner at home - real food, not microwave meals; part of his promise that things would be different - so there's more food in the fridge than there's ever been. El decides it's time for another experiment.

(She likes that word too. It means to try something new, with no expectations on the outcome.)

Food has been an adventure since her first day out of the lab - and not always a pleasant one. She likes potato chips because they're salty and crunchy but peanuts - almonds, cashews, pistachios - are awful. Peanut butter is delicious, but apple butter is so close to apple

sauce that the sight of it is enough to send her reeling. She doesn't like pickles at all, or mustard, and she loves cola but she can't look at Coke cans so they only ever have generic brand. Orange juice hurts her stomach, and milk tastes funny, but sometimes Hopper buys apple juice and that's almost as good as pop.

They have more now - fresh foods, uncooked; fruits and vegetables, raw meat and rice and pasta, jars and cans and cartons and bags. She's had most of it in some form or another, but now she goes through the fridge methodically and tastes every single thing she hasn't already had on it's own.

There's more than a few missteps, but plenty of successes. Hopper comes home that night to find her consuming a tomato like an apple, and eating spoonfuls of mayonnaise out of a mug. He gags, and tells her she shouldn't be eating mayo on it's own, but then they get in a very stupid argument when he can't tell her why and his solution is simply to quit buying the damn stuff.

(A few years later, she'll let Mike into the cabin and he'll sidle up behind her where she's standing at the stove. Hop will be working late, so she'll be making them dinner and they're planning to take full advantage of the very empty cabin. She'll have a part-time job by then, and Hopper won't be able to stop her from spending her money as she pleases, so she'll be licking mayonnaise off a spoon when Mike wraps his arms around her waist and says, "Ooh, can I have a bite?"

Unthinking - because she'll know it's not normal, eating mayo out of a mug - she'll feed him a spoonful and then watch in both horror and elation as his face freezes, then contorts, and he spits the glob of mayonnaise out. Most of the condiment will make it into his hand, but some of it gets on his shirt and he'll look at her in horror and say, "Oh my god are you eating mayonnaise? I thought it was pudding!"

She'll laugh so hard she cries, he'll refuse to kiss her on the mouth until she brushes her teeth, and the story will be one they both tell strangers, laughing, for the rest of their lives.)

She's delighted to discover that food frequently means family - and family means so many different things.



Family is her and Hopper and Eggo Extravaganza on a Sunday afternoon, the both of them too contentedly lazy to attempt anything more taxing than putting frozen waffles in a toaster, then washing the dishes together even though there are only two cups, two forks, and one plate.

Family is Christmas at the Byers' house, and Thanksgiving dinner with the Wheelers and listening to Hopper complain about how he has to put on a nice shirt and make small talk with Mike's dad. ("Do you own a nice shirt?" she'll ask, the question both genuine and teasing, and they'll both laugh when he replies, "Hell if I know!") It's holding Mike's hand under the table, the both of them convinced they're being sneaky about it, and meanwhile every adult in the room can tell what's happening, even Ted. It's the color Mike's face turns when Holly yells, "Stop holding hands and pass the potatoes damnit!" and the way Nancy laughs when Holly gets sent to timeout for swearing and Mike gets scolded for his reply ("Shut the hell up, Holly!")

Family is cookouts at the Sinclair house over the summer, and pizza in the Wheeler basement, and decorating cookies for the theatre fundraiser with Dustin and Claudia. It's sharing a large coke with cherry syrup with Max, because no one else wants that much sugar in the summer heat. It's Steve letting them use his pool and making hot dogs on the grill, and Nancy slipping her a glass of champagne on New Year's Eve when she's seventeen.

Years down the road, family is sitting on the patio in the backyard of the house she and Mike own, still holding hands under the table, and having breakfast with Will and his new boyfriend (who are, coincidentally, also holding hands under the table). It's hosting Thanksgiving for the first time, even if she's not the one who does most of the cooking. It's eating cold cuts and sliced cheese right out of the package, still in bed, still undressed, on her ninth wedding anniversary, because neither she nor Mike have any energy for anything that isn't each other.

Family is food and friendship and belonging and kept promises. Hopper promises her things will be different, and El smiles to herself as she dips her spoon back in the mayo jar. So far he's doing a pretty good job of keeping this one.

## *Dance:*

If the Snow Ball is a turning point in her life, dancing with Mike is the axis it's spinning on. It's sweet, and simple - much like the pressure of his mouth on hers - and El thinks she could explode with the perfection of the moment. They dance every slow dance together, closer and closer, and when it's time to go home she almost cries, because dancing with Mike is absolutely her most favorite thing in the entire world. There will be other things with Mike, in later years, that blow the dancing clean out of the water, but when she's fourteen and completely besotted nothing else even comes close.

She lays in bed that night, thinking of Audrey Hepburn singing, "I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more," and she has good dreams for the first time in a long time.

She won't be brave enough to dance to any of the faster songs, still awkward in her body and around her peers, but the next time she's alone in the cabin she puts on a record and attempts some of the more memorable moves she saw at the dance. It's not as much fun as she thinks it would have been at the Snow Ball, surrounded by kids her own age, and her obsession wanes - but doesn't die - as the weeks pass.

Winter turns into spring, and she's allowed to see her friends more. Spring becomes summer, and she gets to go outside as long as she's got company. In the fall she starts school. Mike asks her to the Homecoming dance, and the entire party goes (mostly at her insistence, though Dustin's also excited). She's nervous and excited and anxious and happy.

It turns out she's also right - dancing is a lot more fun when you're not the only one doing it. It's like something inside of her bursts open, and movement comes pouring out of her at such a rate that the rest of her friends have trouble keeping up. She's on her feet the entire night, and by the end of it she's a sweating, smiling mess.

(Mike doesn't seem to mind, though. He still wraps his arms around her for every slow dance, and kisses her goodnight with such

enthusiasm that her toes tingle.)

She's so elated and lost in her own revelry that her spirits are only slightly dampened by the discovery that Mike's an absolutely awful dancer. If it's anything more complicated than swaying side to side he's likely to fall on his face, and he steps on her toes (and Lucas') twice before El takes pity on him and tells him he can go sit down if he wants, which he does with a mumbled, "Oh my god, thank you."

She feels a little bad at first, because he's obviously mortified and he was only out there in the first place because she'd asked him to be, but then Dustin grabs one of her hands and spins her under his arm in a tight circle. Her skirt flares out around her legs, and a delighted laugh falls, unbidden from her smiling mouth.

"Again!" she demands, breathless. Dustin's laughing too, and he spins her not once but twice. Then he spins her so many times she gets dizzy, and while she's catching her breath she meets Mike's eyes over the crowd. Will is standing next to him with a cup of punch, and he's saying something but El can tell by the look on Mike's face - a broad, bright smile that crinkles his eyes at the corners, directed firmly at her - that he's only half listening. She remembers that look, from before, but now she knows what it means; he's happy she's happy.

Her enthusiasm inspires Dustin to show her a few other moves. He passes her behind his back, twirls her under his arm again, and shows her how to spin in then out. There's something called a box step, and a ball change, and rock-step-triple-step-triple-step and suddenly they're not just moving their bodies all higgledy-piggledy - they're *dancing*, just like in every old movie she's seen.

("Where the hell did you learn this?" Lucas demands with a confused smile.

"Sometimes I dance with my mom," Dustin replies, shrugging. He gives El a toothy grin. "You're a fast learner. You wanna try something more complicated?"

She does.)

This time the obsession doesn't wane. They go to every school dance,

so many that Hopper tells her she's gonna have to wear some of her dresses a second time, but El doesn't mind. She's got a few favorites now, with loose, flowing skirts that spin out around her when she twirls. They practice in Dustin's living room, and Mike's basement, and the main room of the cabin with the couch pushed back to make space.

"Holy shit," Dustin says to her, two days before junior prom (two years after he first twirls her under his arm). "Kelly Bratton just asked me if I had a date to the dance!"

"Did she?" El asks with a polite smile.

"Oh my god she did!" Dustin exclaims. "And I don't and neither does she but now we both do because I asked her and she said yes and we're going. Together. To prom."

El just smiles because she doesn't want to spoil it by telling him that the whole reason he's got a date is because of her. Kelly is on the track team with her, and has been complaining for weeks that both of the guys who've asked her to prom are "Olympic gold medal assholes", and El immediately thinks of how nice Dustin is, how sweet and funny and full of love, and when she makes the gentle suggestion Kelly just raises her eyebrows and says, "Yeah, I guess. He's a pretty good dancer at least. And he's funny"

"You'll have a good time," El replies.

They do. They have such a good time they end up dating for the rest of highschool.

She's sad to lose her dance partner when they move to Terre Haute, but Mike makes the effort in Dustin's stead. He's still terrible, and he still steps on her feet but it doesn't make her love him, or dancing, any less.

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*Run:*

She breaks when she's sixteen, and the effort expended to put the pieces back in place is monumental.

"Look, kid," Hopper says gently, as he's driving her to school for the first time in two and half weeks. "If you find an outlet for this your life is gonna get a lot easier."

It's a conversation they've been having on and off the last week, ever since she's felt well enough to leave her bed (and eat and talk and engage with the world around her). She's not good enough at art to find it soothing the way Will does - there's too much thinking involved for her - and she's resistant to the idea of team sports. People her age tend to find her off-putting unless they get to know her well, and she has no desire to make more close friends, even if she desperately loves people. She's what Mike calls an introvert.

(She worries about labels, sometimes, but when Mike makes the declaration he's quick to assure her there's nothing wrong with it. He's an introvert, and so is Will. Hop's an introvert too, and Joyce and Jonathan. "You recharge from being alone, or with small groups of people," he explains, and while she doesn't like the idea of being alone she can't deny that there is solace in silence. She doesn't mind it the way a lot of people seem to.)

Hopper's been making suggestions, and El knows he's rooting for boxing, but the inherent violence ties her stomach in twisty knots and makes her heartsick, so that's never happening. That doesn't leave much, though.

It's therefore a complete and total surprise when track turns out to be so cathartic. She starts too late in the season to compete (and she's horrendously out of shape, and the coach says, "it's not fair to the rest of the team,") but they agree to take her on and with a little determination and a lot of practice, she falls head over heels in love - so in love that she signs up for cross-country the following fall. "Don't slouch this summer," Coach Whitehall warns her when she turns the form in at the end of the school year. "In fact - here." He hands her a training schedule, to help her continue to build stamina, and says, "See you in the fall, Hopper."

She doesn't want to run laps on the school track in the summer heat, but it only takes a little cajoling to get Mike and Hopper to help her set up mile markers on the many winding trails that surround the cabin. They make a morning of it; Mike with his map and protractor

and compass, Hopper with a hammer and nails and canvas flags cut in different colors. El carries their lunch in her backpack and listens to her two favorite people grumble good-naturedly at each other as they make ever-widening circles around the cabin.

(They find a nice place for lunch and sprawl out in the grass. El passes out sandwiches and cans of soda, and they all eat out of the same bag of chips. Hopper is gracious enough not to comment when Mike stands, wipes his hands on his cargo shorts, and asks if she wants to go back to the little stream they passed. Hop waves them off as he's laying back in the grass, one arm thrown over his eyes against the hot summer sun, and she takes Mike's hand as she follows him out of the clearing. In the deep shade of the trees he pushes her gently but firmly up against the rough bark of an ancient elm, and she lets him. They don't ever make it to the water.)

Halfway through the summer, on a hot night early in July spent down in the cool of the Wheeler basement, she and Lucas both realize that not only have they both been running every morning, they've been working off the same training schedule - though he's doing it for conditioning and not out of any desire to join track.

"Man!" he exclaims (and they all do this, even Max - call each other "man" even when it's not at all applicable). "I've been running out on the hot black top and you never bothered to mention you marked trails under the nice, shady trees?"

El is at a loss for how to respond, because of all her friends Lucas is the hardest for her to read. When she's older she'll realize it's because he feels deeply and drastically, just like Mike, but unlike Mike he's learned how to hide it. The world has been cruel to him in a way she will only ever partially understand, and he guards his heart carefully and jealously.

"I didn't -" she stutters, searching for words, until Lucas waves a hand at her.

The look on his face is earnest and genuine when he says, "I'm teasing, El. Do you mind if I use the markers? Maybe we could go running together."

She gives the idea genuine thought before nodding. Her favorite thing about her morning run is being able to switch off her brain and just enjoy what her body is capable of, and she's doesn't want to spoil that with talking but she knows immediately the concern is invalid: Lucas, much like her and Will, isn't uncomfortable in silence. He doesn't try to fill it the way Mike and Dustin always do.

So they start running together, and the routine feels so natural that it continues through their senior year, even when El drops cross country for cheerleading. Lucas is easy company. He teases her more than the others do, but he's quick to point it out when she seems confused. More than that, he never sugar-coats his explanations.

("Sugar-coat?" she asks, and Lucas grimaces a little, but nods, and says, "It's... sort of what Mike does, when you ask him something and he knows you're not going to like the answer so he... uses words that won't hurt your feelings, even when other words work better.")

El nods. She's noticed this too, and part of her thinks she should be upset, because it can be frustrating, but at the end of the day she's just grateful someone actually cares about keeping her safe.)

The running, too, falls to the wayside when they move. She doesn't need it as much, or she thinks she doesn't. It will be nearly five years - and many long miles from both Hawkins and Terre Haute - when her therapist (a tall, middle-aged woman with long, thick hair gone gray completely through) reminds her that practicing mindfulness can help her maintain when she's having a particularly rough time with the memories of what happened to her. She suggests a few activities, none of which hold much appeal, but then El says, "I used to run track in high school."

Carrie nods at her. "You can use running for mindfulness."

El smiles, small and thoughtful. "Maybe I'll pick it up again."

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*Dress:*

"I love your jacket," Emily Jenko says to her one fall afternoon as

they sit down in British Lit. “I wish I could get away with stuff like that.”

“Stuff like what?” El asks, confused, as she pulls out her binder and her battered copy of *Jane Eyre* (which she’s read already, and loves).

“Like... everything you wear,” Emily replies with a smile and a vague wave. “You just throw on whatever and it works. I could never pull that off.”

El frowns, still confused, but also troubled by Em’s self-deprecating tone. She likes Emily - the girl reminds her of Mike, in more than just a few ways. Emily hadn’t groaned and begged to trade partners when they’d been paired together for a poetry project at the start of the school year. She’s not nearly as vocal, but she’s sharp, and kind, and awkwardly tall (which people aren’t nearly as nice about in girls, El’s learned). They’re on the cheer squad together, and they both come from inauspicious families.

“You could,” El insists, but Em is shaking her head.

“No,” she says. “I care way too much what people think. You don’t give a shit.”

That much, at least, is true.

The jacket in question is acid-wash denim. It’s cut short - military length, Hop calls it - and fitted, with a mandarin collar, and El had saved her allowance for two months to buy it out of a catalogue she’d found on Mrs. Wheeler’s kitchen counter. (“Take it, honey,” Karen had said the second time she’d found El looking through it. “I’m too old for those clothes anyways.”) She wears it with the sleeves rolled back, unbuttoned over sundresses and flannels and long t-shirts.

One innocuous afternoon, sitting at the Byers’ kitchen table, ignoring her homework in favor of watching Will experiment with ink washes, she knocks an open pot of black ink off the edge of the kitchen table, and isn’t quick enough to catch it before it splashes onto the nearest chair, right where her jacket is sitting. She’s heartbroken, and though they get it in the wash almost immediately all that really does is turn the whole thing a weird grayish color.



"I should have put the lid back on," Will says, distraught. "I'm so sorry El."

"It's not your fault," she says tearfully, gazing at the still-damp denim she's managed to ruin.

They stand by the washing machine in silence for a few moments, until Will says, "Hey, can I?.." He takes the jacket from her, lays it out on the kitchen table, and says, "I have an idea. I'll, uh... I'll bring this back to you in a few days?"

What Will brings her at school that Friday is a masterpiece. He's outlined the original ink splashes, which have washed out a little but are still prominent stains across the left sleeve and upper shoulder and back, in dark lines with the same ink, and the whole thing has paint splattered artistically across it in her favorite colors - bright blue and pale pink and white. It's so beautiful she almost cries, right there in the hallway between classes.

It's one of her favorite articles of clothing in a carefully curated closet. Hopper's a public servant, so they don't have a lot of money, and El spends the little that he gives her mostly on clothes. She and Max spend hours combing thrift store racks and going to garage sales (which Max really isn't into, though she's happy to keep El company), and El only buys something if she absolutely loves it.

The problem, of course, is that she loves a little bit of *everything*. She still has the jacket Kali gave her, and she still loves it, and wears it the same way she wears the denim jacket. She likes soft dresses and flowing skirts, ballet flats and combat boots, torn jeans and frayed cut-offs, all of it in every color under the sun.

(She has a special place in her heart for oversized sweaters, their wool washed to a gentle softness. Mike knows to let her go through the donation boxes his mom makes every spring, so she can pick out anything she wants, and she always makes him wear it one more time, no matter how badly it fits, so it smells more like him.)

What all that means is that she basically wears whatever she wants in whatever manner she wants, and somehow she's managing to pull it off. She doesn't understand the obsession with conformity a lot of the

more well-to-do kids seem to have, when there's so much out there to choose from.

Just once, when they're walking down the hallway hand in hand, Chase Heckendorn makes a comment they both overhear about how Mike's mom probably still picks out all his clothes for him, and she watches, incensed, as Mike's face colors angrily. She tries to pull her hand out of his; she wants to march back to Chase and demand, "So what if she does?" but Mike just pulls her along behind him with a muttered, "Leave it, El. I don't care."

She knows that's not true; she can read it in his face. But she also knows that Mike cares for other people's opinions about as much as she does, so she follows his request and doesn't knock Chase's teeth out of his stupid, smug face like she wants to. "Hey," she says instead, pulling him to a stop off to the side of the hallway. She debates whether or not to tease him the way she's about to, then decides to take the chance. "I like the clothes your mom picks out for you."

His blushes again, and bites back a laugh, his expression soft and adoring. "Thanks," he says, voice low, before bending to press his mouth to hers, his other hand finding her waist and squeezing gently.

For her seventeenth birthday, Dustin gives her one of the most amazing presents she'll ever receive - and he'll continue to replace it, in different iterations, as it wears out every ten years or so.

They're sitting in the Byers' backyard, around a homemade fire pit. The fall air is chilly, but the roaring flames keep them all comfortable, and El's having such a good time she wants to open her presents outside. Hopper groans, but he and Mike both fetch the boxes and gift bags from the house with little complaint.

"Do mine last!" Dustin exclaims, then says, with a little bit of smugness, "What, no objections?" when Mike keeps his peace.

Mike mutters something, and even though she knows he's embarrassed, El's in such a good mood that she says, "He already gave me his gift."

“Yeah?” Lucas teases, wagging his eyebrows. “What was it?”

“None of your business,” El says smartly before Mike can reply, and takes the first present handed to her.

There’s some fun, but functional stuff from Joyce and Hop - a dress she’s been eyeing that’s a little out of their price range, a few books she’s borrowed from the library half a dozen times at this point. Will gives her a charcoal drawing of one of her favorite pictures of her and Mike, and Lucas and Max pooled their money to buy her a VHS copy of Labyrinth.

Dustin’s gift takes the cake. Dustin’s gift blows all the other gifts away. Dustin’s gift makes Hopper and Max both laugh until they cry.

Dustin’s gift is a neon yellow t-shirt that’s been screen printed with one of the pictures Karen Wheeler had taken of Mike the night of the Snow Ball. Fourteen-year old Mike looks supremely unhappy, staring up at her from the front of the t-shirt, but all El can think is that it’s the best thing she owns now and she’s going to wear it everywhere, forever, until it falls apart.

“Please don’t,” Mike begs, mortified. “Please.”

“No promises,” El replies, smiling as she leans over to kiss him and their friends clap and holler around them.

\*\*\*

*Love:*

El’s just stepped into the shower when Mike finally makes it home from his internship. The bathroom door is open, and she stands still under the warm spray of the shower head and listens closely to the familiar sounds of him returning home: the thump of his backpack hitting the floor, his keys jingling as they land on the coffee table. She peeks out from behind the shower curtain just in time to watch him pass by the bathroom.

“Mike?” she calls gently, and when his only reply is a loud groaning noise from the direction of their bedroom she turns the water off.

She towels off just enough to keep from making a puddle on the linoleum, and pads gently to the bedroom door. The sight that greets her is both sweet and heartbreaking; Mike is lying face down in the middle of their bed, completely clothed except for his shoes, socked feet flexing as they hang off the end of the bed.

The mattress dips under her as she sits beside him. He groans a little, but then sighs when she brushes the hair off the nape of his neck and bends to press a kiss there. "Rough day?" she asks.

He makes another unhappy noise, and says, "Not really," his voice muffled by the bedspread. "Just... long. I'm tired."

"Let's go to bed early," she says as she moves to straddle his thighs, pushing his shirt up so she can press the heels of her palms into the tense muscles at the small of his back. He groans again, but this time the noise is one of appreciation, and he pushes himself up on his elbows just enough to shimmy the sweat-dampened polo over his head. She takes the cue, and digs her fingers into his shoulders, which are still drastically freckled from the summer sun. He squirms a little, folding both his arms underneath his head, and when the movement flexes the muscles hiding under his shoulder blades El finds herself struck by the urge to lean down and gently sink her teeth into the soft flesh. Instead she settles for worming both her arms underneath him and pressing herself against his back, lips pressing softly against all the skin she can reach when she turns her head.

Mike goes very still beneath her. "Not even a towel, huh?" he asks, voice husky, and he sucks in a breath when she shrugs, the movement dragging her skin against his.

"Still gotta shower," she replies. She's about to ask him to come with her, but he shifts under her so suddenly the only noise she can make is a laughing squeal. He rolls onto his back, one arm locking around her waist to hold her in place and haul her up his body while his other hand tangles in the hair at the base of her skull and pulls her face down close to his own. His hold on her is insistent but gentle - she could shake him off easily if she wanted to, if he's misread the situation or misinterpreted her actions, or if all she wants is his arms around her. He always leaves room for her to pull back.

A thrill of emotion shoots through her, hot and heavy. She's so in love with him she wants to cry, and her hands find his face, palms rubbing gently at the stubble that's started to collect along his jawline. She feels like she's holding the whole world in her shaking fingers, and looking down into his dark eyes, his pupils blown wide, she knows he feels the same. She doesn't want to pull back.

He makes a pleased, needy noise when she closes the distance between them but the kiss she presses to his lips is gentle, almost chaste, and he whines unhappily when she climbs off of him.

"Where are you going?" he says, reaching for her hand as she sits at the edge of the bed.

She doesn't let him stop her, and instead uses his grip to pull him up with her. "Shower," she says, and he follows her obediently into the bathroom. She starts the water again while he undresses, and when he climbs in after her he wraps his arms around her shoulders and for awhile they just stand there, pressed together under the warm spray. The water seems to insulate them, pushing out all the worries and cares of their everyday lives. In that moment it's easy for her to pretend nothing exists but the two of them and the way they love each other. His heartbeat is steady and strong beneath her cheek, and all she wants is to take care of him. He's tired and stressed and overworked.

She unwinds her arms from his waist so she can loop them around his neck and pull him down so their cheeks press together. She nuzzles her nose against his ear, hands spanning the breadth of his shoulders and maneuvering them around in a tight circle so he's standing under the water. Their shower is tiny, and old, and he's tall enough that the shower head really only reaches his neck no matter how far upwards they tilt it.

It's awkward with her arms still around his neck, but she cups her hands under the spray to gather water in her palms and then runs her fingers back through his hair, dampening the dark strands. He kisses her then, his mouth hot and open against her own, but she pulls back before he can dive deeper and gives in to the ridiculous urge that's overwhelming her. "Can I wash your hair?"

“What?” he replies blearily, obviously overwhelmed by the press of her against him, but his eyes clear a little when her hands, still in his hair, tighten and tug gently. “I mean, yeah. You can try at least. How-”

“Get on your knees,” she says before he can finish, not wanting to explain, just asking him to trust her.

Mike bites back a smile, his face flushing. “You know if you wanna get me in bed...” he teases, but he complies, kneeling in front of her, his hands on her waist to keep his balance. The water washes over his shoulders and neck, the back and top of his head, and he screws his eyes shut against the onslaught until El can lean over him and adjust the shower head. He wraps his arms tightly around her when she does this, face pressing into her stomach as he steadies her, and she laughs when she tries to pull back and he refuses to let go. She feels his teeth graze her skin, but she’s hypersensitive to the touch and has to squirm away, still laughing, before she accidentally knees him in the solar plexus.

He’s smiling against her, and she buries her fingers in his hair again, scratching lightly at his scalp before making a gentle fist and tugging his head backwards. “Behave,” she chides gently. “You’ll get soap in your eyes.”

“Worth it,” Mike declares, but he does as he’s told. She bends to grab the shampoo, and the air around them charges as she works it through his hair, scrubbing gently. She’s overestimated how much she needs - her own hair takes so much - but the result is a thick lather of bubbles pouring down both of them, and it’s hard to regret that sensory experience.

“Close your eyes,” she says when she nudges his head backwards under the spray of the water, one hand cupped around his neck to guide him. He swallows once, shoulders relaxing further as she runs her other hand through his hair to make sure all the shampoo is rinsed away, and when she feels she’s finished she takes his face in her hands and presses a soft, lingering kiss against his forehead.

He presses his forehead against her again when she rubs conditioner through his hair (which he gently insists he doesn’t need; he doesn’t

really use it) and it's harder this time to push him away, to insist that he shouldn't distract her, so she hurries through rinsing the conditioner out, her movements growing frantic as one of his hands slides up the inside of her thigh.

"Done," she declares breathlessly, and the second the word leaves her mouth he's guiding her backwards until she's pressing against the cool tile of the wall. The contrast raises goosebumps over her entire body, and his hands on her waist hold her steady as he lays a kiss above her hipbone, sucking gently until a wet, red mark appears.

"Tell me what you want," he asks, still mouthing at the soft skin beneath her navel.

She takes a deep, ragged breath, and it's half a word, half a sob when she she says, "You."

He stills, and tilts his head back to look at her. Their eyes meet, and she feels it again; an overwhelming, all-encompassing urge to care for him, to keep him safe and love him the way he loves her - with everything she has and everything she is and everything she's going to be. There's a long moment where they look at each other, and she can read everything he's feeling in his face but she's still blown away when he says, "You've got me. I'm here, El. Always."

"I love you," she manages, losing the last word as he hikes one of her knees over his shoulder. His eyes never leave hers, and in that stretched-out moment before he touches her, she feels perfectly at home in her body.

They never quite make it back to the bedroom.

### **Author's Note:**

If you made it this far, here's a treat! It's the summary for the next big installment of For the Unknown.

'...she was finding more and more that self-awareness was a double-edged sword. She'd always comprehended that she was different than her peers,

but the more time she spent in the world, the more she felt the gap between herself and others widening - it was expansive, now, and uncrossable. That knowledge made her ache.

For one brief moment of insanity, she wanted to scream, "It doesn't matter!"

Nothing she did would ever bridge that gap.'

The fic is titled "Night is Falling (and the Dawn is Calling)".

Hope you enjoyed.